

PROSPECT: OR, VIEW OF THE MORAL WORLD.

SATURDAY, MARCH 16, 1805.

[NO. II.]

COMMENTS UPON THE SACRED WRITINGS OF THE JEWS AND CHRISTIANS.

NUMBERS...CHAPTER XXII.

The conjuring story concerning Balaam and his ass, containing great injustice, and more folly.

IT is impossible for a sane and contemplative understanding to view the childish stories in the Bible, without being disgusted at the very name of revelation. It appears that truth and revelation are two very different things ; the first is a display of the most just and the most general relation of things, or a knowledge of the facts existing in the moral and physical world ; while the latter, that is, revelation, presents nothing but incongruous and distorted relations, which have no existence in nature, and which serve only to puzzle and perplex the human mind. What has this story of Balaam and his ass to do with the great concerns of the moral world ? Nothing at all ; the story of Tom Thumb, or Jack, the Giant-killer, is as good revelation as this. But let us examine the matter, and we shall be better able to determine the true character of this marvellous piece of *holy writ*. Balak, king of Moab, who, for ought that appears, was a man of pretty good character, when about to be invaded by the chosen band of Jewish robbers, sends for Balaam to his assistance. Balaam receives the permission and command of God to go, according to request ; but while he was proceeding on his journey, it appears that the passionate and capricious God of antiquity changed his mind, and became very angry ; in consequence of this, he throws obstructions in the way of Balaam's progress, and becomes indirectly the cause of cruelty and injustice. The following quotation will show the fact :

" And God's anger was kindled because he went : and the angel of the Lord stood in the way for an adversary against him. Now he was riding upon his ass, and his two servants were with him. And the ass saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand : and the ass turned aside out of the way, and went into the field : and Balaam smote the ass to turn her into the way. But the angel of the Lord stood in a path of the vineyards, a wall being on this side, and a wall on that side. And when the ass saw the angel of the Lord, she thrust herself unto the wall, and crushed Balaam's foot against the wall : and he smote her again. And the angel of the Lord went further, and stood in a narrow place, where was no way to turn either to the right hand or to the left. And when the ass saw the angel of the Lord, she fell down under Balaam : and Balaam's anger was kindled, and he smote the ass with a staff. And the Lord opened the mouth of the ass, and she said unto Balaam, what have I done unto thee, that thou hast smitten me these three times ? And Balaam

said unto the ass, because thou hast mocked me : I would there were a sword in mine hand, for now would I kill thee. And the ass said unto Balaam, am not I thine ass ; upon which thou hast ridden ever since I was thine, unto this day ? Was I ever wont to do so unto thee ? And he said, nay. Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, and his sword drawn in his hand, and he bowed down his head, and fell flat on his face."

It appears that this brute animal on which Balaam rode, possessed keener optics than those which fall to the lot of man ! The celestial messenger, the angel of the Lord was discovered by the ass, while the more intelligent rider remained ignorant of the true cause which opposed his progress. Asses in modern days, are not so sharp-sighted; for if they were, there would not be so much weekly nonsense promulgated in favour of a system of religion hostile to both science and virtue. The circumstance of Balaam's ass having opened her mouth, and of eloquently remonstrating against the cruelty of her master, must be matter of great surprize to unbelievers, who think that reason and not faith ought to form the basis of all human decision. In the 27th verse it is said, that the Lord opened the mouth of the ass ; would it not have been better to open the eyes of Balaam before, that he might have seen as well as the animal on which he rode, and then he would not have exhibited such barbarous and brutal severity ? But the Old Testament is remarkable for inconsistency, and the God therein described, is not the real God of nature, but an immoral monster, moving with destructive and terrific energy over the whole earth ! The remonstrance of Balaam's ass in the 30th verse, is both reasonable and pathetic, and places an indelible stigma, an everlasting disgrace upon the character of that divinity, who, according to the 31st verse of this chapter, condescends at last to do what he ought to have done first. Men are wicked, and they have made unto themselves wicked Gods. The theological reveries of antiquity have descended to our times ; the liberty of the press, and the energy of thought, will consign them to oblivion or eternal infamy, in less than one thousand years. This is a prophesy, but let it be remembered that the writer has no claim to inspiration, as was the case with the pious and heaven-struck hierophants of antiquity.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.

ARCHIMEDES, a celebrated geometrician, born at Syracuse, in Sicily, and related to Hiero, king of Syracuse. He was remarkable for his extraordinary application to mathematical studies, in which he used to be so much engaged, that his servants were often obliged to take him from them by force. He had such a surprizing invention in mechanics, that he affirmed to Hiero, if he had another earth, whereon to plant his machines, he would move this which we inhabit. Archimedes became most famous by his curious contrivances, whereby the city of Syracuse was so long defended, when besieged by Marcellus. Against the vessels, which came up close to the walls, he contrived a kind of crow, projected above the wall, with an iron grapple fastened to a strong chain. This was let down upon the prow of a ship, and by means of

the weight of a heavy counterpoise of lead, raised up the prow, and set the vessel upright upon her poop ; then dropping it all of a sudden, as if it had fallen from the walls, it sunk so far into the sea, that it let in a great deal of water, even when it fell directly on its keel. However, notwithstanding all his art, Syracuse was at length taken by Marcellus, who commanded his soldiers to have a particular regard to the safety of Archimedes ; but this ingenious man was unfortunately slain by a soldier, who did not know him. Archimedes is said to have been killed about 208 years before the birth of Christ. We have several of his works still extant, but the greatest part of them are lost.

OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE EGYPTIANS.

HAVING taken a survey of the state of barbaric philosophy in the Eastern nations, the first country which calls for our notice, as we pass Southward, is Egypt ; a country, which has claimed the honour of being the first seat of learning, and the fountain, whence the streams of philosophy flowed to Chaldea, and other Asiatic nations, till it reached the remotest borders of India. Though there seems to be no sufficient ground for admitting these high pretensions, Egypt is unquestionably to be ranked among the most ancient civilized countries, and was very early famous for wisdom. Many eminent philosophers among the Greeks, such as Orpheus, Thales, Pythagoras, Democritus, and Plato, visited Egypt in search of knowledge.

Nevertheless, it must be owned, that the history of Egyptian learning and philosophy, after all the pains which have been taken to elucidate the subject, still remains involved in thick clouds of uncertainty. The causes of this uncertainty it is easier to enumerate, than to overcome. To mention them may, however, be of use, in enabling us to judge how far we may expect satisfaction, and where it will be necessary, for want of sufficient information, to suspend our judgment.

The history of the Egyptian philosophy looks backwards, beyond the period in which men first began to commit the great transactions of society to writing, into the infant state of the world, when arts and sciences, as far as they were known, were only taught by oral instruction, concerning which nothing remains, but obscure fables, and doubtful conjectures. From the numerous natural and political changes, which, in a long succession of ages, have taken place in Egypt, its customs and tenets have undergone various alterations and corruptions ; whence it has happened, that authors who have written of the philosophy of Egypt at different periods, not adverting to these changes, have given different, and even contradictory relations. Knowledge was communicated, by the Egyptian priests, under the concealment of symbolical characters or hieroglyphics, the key of which was at first intrusted only to the initiated, and had since been irrecoverably lost : a circumstance which has afforded subsequent theorists an opportunity of accommodating their representations of the doctrines of the Egyptians to their own system. Even at the time when Egyptian wisdom first flourished, different dogmas were taught in the different schools at Thebes, Memphis, and other places ; which has occasioned great diversity in the accounts given of the Egyptians by Herodotus, Diodo-

rus Siculus, and Plutarch. At a later period, when Alexandria became the common resort of learned men from every part of the world, the combination of their opinions with those of the native Egyptians gave philosophy and religion a form till then unknown. The state of opinions in Egypt was at all times subject to alteration, from the dependence of the priests, who were the chief depositaries of knowledge, upon the civil power, and their consequent inclination to suit the doctrines of religion to the taste of the reigning prince, and to accommodate them to the purposes of policy; a design, which might easily be effected by means of hieroglyphical characters. Farther difficulties arise from the vanity of the Greek writers, our chief authorities on this subject, who have every where confounded the gods of the Egyptians, and their theogony, with their own mythology, and, upon the ground of the slightest resemblances, have concluded Osiris to be Jupiter, Typhon to be Pluto, and other Egyptian and Grecian gods to be the same divinities under different names; hereby involving the mythological history of both countries in endless confusion. Nor must we expect much assistance, in clearing our way through this thorny path, from modern interpreters of Egyptian learning: for we find them perpetually wandering in the mazes of conjecture, and amusing themselves and their readers, with unsatisfactory and inconsistent explanations of Egyptian mysteries. Of this we have a memorable example in the fanciful conjectures which have been offered, concerning the Isiac Marble, one of the remains of Egyptian hieroglyphics, which was found by a common workman, and presented to Vincent Duke of Mantua, in the year 1630. In this tablet Kircher discovered sundry religious mysteries favourable to Christianity, and Pignontus found precepts of moral and political wisdom; another critic was of opinion, that it was a Runic calendar; while a fourth attempted to persuade the learned world, that these characters described the properties and use of the magnet, and of the mariner's compass. What assistance can the cautious inquirer expect from remains of antiquity, which afford such ample scope for the exercise of imagination? Lastly, it is a circumstance which greatly embarrasses every attempt to trace out the ancient philosophy of Egypt, that we have few remains of ancient writings, which treat directly upon this subject. Of Cheremon, Manetho, and other Egyptian writers, we have only a few fragments, preserved in other authors: their works probably perished in the destruction, so fatal to literature, of the Alexandrian Library. The book *de Hieroglyphicis*, under the name of *Horus Apollo*, is spurious.

In the midst of such numerous causes of uncertainty, it will not be thought surprising that it is only in our power to lay before our readers the following particulars, as a probable state of facts respecting the ancient Egyptian philosophy.

Theut or Thoth, called by the Phenicians Taaut, by the Greeks Hermes, and by the Romans Mercury, is generally spoken of, by ancient writers, as the first author of the Egyptian learning; but little is known concerning him. Cicero mentions five Mercuries, three of whom were Greeks; the fourth, the son of Nilus, whom the Egyptians thought it unlawful to name; and the fifth, him whom the Phaneata worshipped, who is said to have slain Argus, and by that means to have possessed himself of the government of Egypt. The Egyp-

tians called him Thoth, and named the first month of the year after him. In this account Cicero confounds the Egyptian with the Arcadian Mercury. Thoth, according to Diodorus Siculus, was chief minister to Osiris, and assisted him by his counsel ; the historian adds, that he improved language, invented letters, instituted religious rites, and taught astronomy, music, and other arts. Other writers also assert, that he invented letters : and the assertion may be credited, if by letters we understand symbolical characters, whence alphabetical letters were afterwards formed.

*Nondum flumineas Memphis contexere biblos
Noverat, et saxis tantum volueresque feræque
Sculptaque servabant magicas animalia linguas.*

The Egyptian Mercury or Thoth, was probably some man of superior genius, who, before the age of Moses (for among the Egyptians knowledge was in his time considerably advanced) had invented useful arts, and taught the first rudiments of science ; and who caused his instructions to be engraved in emblematical figures upon tables or columns of stone, which he dispersed over the country, for the purpose of enlightening the ignorant multitude. One of the principal uses, to which these symbolical inscriptions were applied, doubtless was, to teach the doctrines of religion, and maxims of political and moral wisdom. Some writers have fancifully enough, conjectured this Thoth, or Mercury, to have been the same with Adam, or Enoch, or Joseph. Others have, with more plausibility, maintained, that he was the Jewish legislator ; but the circumstances of resemblance between Thoth and Moses, were such as might easily be supposed to have occurred between any other eminent founders of states.

Besides this Hermes or Mercury, there was another, who, at a later period, was equally celebrated. Manetho distinguishes him from the first, and says of him, that from engraved tables of stone, which had been buried in the earth, he translated the sacred characters written by the first Mercury, and wrote the explanation in books, which were deposited in the Egyptian temples. He calls him the son of Agathodæmon, and adds, that to him are ascribed the restoration of the wisdom taught by the first Mercury, and the revival of geometry, arithmetic, and the arts, among the Egyptians. He was also called Trismegistus. The written monuments of the first Hermes having been lost or neglected, in certain civil revolutions or natural calamities, the second Hermes recovered them, and made use of them as means of establishing his authority. By an ingenious interpretation of the symbols inscribed upon the ancient columns, he impressed the sacred sanction of antiquity upon his own institutions : and, to perpetuate their influence upon the minds of the people, he committed the columns, with his own interpretations, to the care of the priesthood.—Hence he obtained a high degree of respect among the people, and was long revered as the restorer of learning. From the tables of the first Hermes, he is said to have written, as commentaries and explanations, an incredible number of books. It has been asserted, that he was the author of more than twenty thousand volumes, which treated of universal principles, of the nature and orders of celestial beings, of astrol-

ogy, medicine, and other topics. But many of the subjects, on which these writings are said to have treated, were unknown in the early period of the Egyptian philosophy. There can be little doubt, therefore, that they were the forgeries of a later age, when it became one of the common artifices of imposture to give the sanction of antiquity to fiction.

From these first authors of Egyptian wisdom, all learning was transmitted to posterity by means of the priesthood, a sacred order probably instituted by the second Hermes. The Egyptian priests had the reputation of extraordinary sanctity, and were even supposed to participate of divinity. Hence they obtained great sway over the people, and possessed no small share of influence in civil affairs. At several fixed hours of the day they celebrated the praises of the gods in hymns: the rest of their time they employed in mathematical studies, in astronomical observations, or in other scientific pursuits. They observed a great degree of gravity in their dress and external deportment. They were exceedingly attentive to personal cleanliness; and, for this purpose, they made use of frequent ablutions, and of circumcision. They held it unlawful to eat fish or beans. This latter superstition was adopted by the Pythagoreans.

These priests concealed the mysteries of religion and philosophy from the vulgar, by means of written characters, which none but the initiated could understand. These were of two kinds, hieroglyphical, and alphabetical. The former, were those symbolical characters, which were inscribed by the first Hermes, on pillars or tables of stone, and which were afterwards copied and interpreted by the priests. The latter was the method of writing invented, or adopted, for the sake of explaining the hieroglyphic records, but made use of only by the priests, and for religious purposes. Hence these characters were called Sacerdotal, or Sacred. Besides these, there was a third kind of character in common use among the people, called the Epistolary.

Many attempts have been made to explain the hieroglyphic mode of writing, from the few specimens, and the imperfect accounts, which remain from antiquity. But it would be surprising, if the sagacity of modern criticism were able to decypher characters, which do not appear to have been always perfectly understood by the Egyptian priests themselves, and which were, if not at their first introduction, certainly in their subsequent application, made use of for the purpose of concealment. The sacerdotal writings were deposited in the inmost recesses of temples: none but priests of the higher orders were commonly permitted to examine them; no stranger could obtain a sight of them, without an express order from the king, or without submitting to several troublesome ceremonies, particularly that of circumcision. Pythagoras seems to have been the only man, who ever chose to gratify his curiosity on these hard conditions.

From this regular system of concealment, it may reasonably be inferred, that the Egyptian theology and philosophy were chiefly contrived to preserve and increase the authority of the priesthood, and to aid the designs of government. At the same time, it is very evident that we can have little hope, at this distant period, of being able to draw aside the veil, which has so long concealed the Egyptian mysteries. What kind of claim the Egyptians had to the character of phi-

losophers, will, however, in part appear, if we proceed to inquire into the state of knowledge among them, respecting particular sciences and arts.

Geometry, whether invented by the Egyptians or not (a question, which it is not our province particularly to examine) was certainly known among them. But, to suppose that they were acquainted with the higher and more abstruse parts of this science, is a mistake. The necessity they were under, of annually settling the boundaries of their lands, which were broken up by the overflowing of the Nile, taught them the art of mensuration ; but we have no proof, that they possessed more mathematical knowledge than this art required. The elementary discoveries, which were made by Pythagoras and Thales, after their return from Egypt, sufficiently prove, that this science must have been in a very imperfect state in that country, at the time when they visited it for the purpose of acquiring knowledge. It may, therefore, be certainly concluded, that we are indebted to Greece, and not to Egypt, for the advanced state in which the mathematical sciences have been transmitted from ancient to modern times.

The case was nearly similar with respect to astronomy. Some writers have made the Egyptians, and others the Babylonians, the original authors of this science. But it is probable, that the first elements of astronomy were discovered by different nations, whose habit of life led them to the frequent observation of the heavens. Thus Cicero says, "The Egyptians and Babylonians, dwelling in open plains, where nothing intercepted the view of the heavenly bodies, devoted themselves to the study of astronomy." If, however, the honour of inventing this science be given to the Egyptians, it must be allowed, that their knowledge of the subject was neither sufficiently extensive, nor profound, to entitle them to the character of astronomical philosophers. They observed the rising and setting of the stars, the order of the signs in the Zodiac, and the aspects of the planets ; but it was merely to enable them to practice astrological arts : they remarked the equinoctial and solstitial points ; but it was only to ascertain the length of the year : they noticed the varieties of weather, and imagined them connected with the appearance or situation of the heavenly bodies ; but they had no other object in view, than to regulate the labours of the husbandman. It was in the Pythagorean school, that Eudoxus first applied mathematical principles to the explanation of the celestial motions ; and it was Thales, a Grecian, who first predicted an eclipse.

The invention of Music is also ascribed to the Egyptians : but this can only relate to the first elements of melody : for the proportion of harmonic sounds, was discovered, as we shall afterwards learn, by Pythagoras.

The origin of the Medical Art was referred by the Egyptians to their demigods. It is chiefly on this account, that the names of Isis, and her son Horus, or Apollo, are so highly celebrated among the Egyptian divinities. Whence Ovid speaking of Apollo says,

Inventum medicina meum est, opiferaque per orbem
Dicor, et herbarum subjecta potentia nobis.

The name of Esculapius, or Serapis, has also, for the same reason, a distinguished place in the Egyptian mythology. But the history of these inventors of medicine is too obscure to afford any other conclusion, than this simple fact, that there were, in the most remote period of the Egyptian history, celebrated men, who devoted themselves to the benevolent office of healing diseases, and who were afterwards, by their grateful, but ignorant and superstitious countrymen, ranked among the gods. Homer indeed speaks of Egypt as fertile in drugs.

But the particulars which are preserved respecting the Egyptian method of practice, will scarcely permit us to rank the Egyptian physicians among philosophers. Herodotus relates, that, in his time, there were distinct physicians for different diseases, which they classed according to the human body. From Diodorus Siculus we learn, that instead of prescribing medicines according to the judgment and experience of the practitioner, every physician was obliged to follow a written code; and if, in adhering to this, he proved unsuccessful, he was free from blame; but, if he ventured to depart from the prescribed forms, though the patient recovered, the physician was to lose his life. In administering medicines, they called in the aid of magical incantations, and pretended that supernatural virtues were, by means of these, communicated to certain plants. In short, from every circumstance which is known concerning medical practice among the Egyptians, it appears, that it was entirely empirical, and that it was artfully connected with superstition, to serve the purposes of priesthood.

The art of Alchymy has been said to have been known by the ancient Egyptians; and, from the founder of the Egyptian philosophy, it has been called the Hermetic art. But we find no certain account of any attempt to effect the transmutation of metals, earlier than the time of Constantine.

(To be continued.)

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